



## NEWS BACKGROUNDS

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### ESCAPE FROM EGYPT

By

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What happened inside Egypt during those early days of the war was largely unknown to the world. I was there — and I was one of those fortunate enough to leave Egypt on the first transportation out after the war began. Roads were blocked everywhere. Cairo airport was closed. I consider it a minor miracle that the ABC News team I was with managed to get out of the country safely.

In Cairo, for more than one week before the war began, the Egyptian Ministry of Guidance tightly restricted movements of all newsmen, allowing us access only to information the Egyptian Government wanted to see published. Nevertheless we remained in Cairo — feeling that what little information we could get out of the country was better than none.

But with the start of war on a hazy Monday morning things got much worse. A mob of civilians attacked my ABC crew and myself outside the Nile Hilton immediately after Cairo's first air raid of the war. They grabbed our equipment. Three hours later a government official showed up and gave us back our equipment, but not all our news material.

Full censorship went into effect that day . . . and there was no chance of getting any reports out of the country without censorship because all commercial aircraft traffic was suspended as soon as the bombs started falling around Cairo. Later that same day the Egyptian Government closed off all reporting channels to ABC News correspondent Charles Arnot and myself by refusing to allow us to make our scheduled radio news broadcasts from Cairo. Since we could no longer do our job in Egypt, we decided it was time to leave. By mid-time the mob of the Egyptian

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people – whipped up into a frenzied hatred of Americans by government propaganda – made it unsafe to go on the streets.

We left Cairo by car that afternoon. It was the same day the Egyptian Government accused the United States and Britain of using their warplanes to aid Israel in the fight. There were few Egyptians who doubted that accusation. Hatred for Americans found one outlet that day when more than 1,000 people attacked the U.S. Embassy in Cairo. Egyptian police on horseback rode roughshod through the mob, breaking up the spontaneous attack.



**ISRAELI ARMOR MOVING INTO  
THE GAZA STRIP**  
could remember at every military checkpoint.

Meanwhile we were on the road to Alexandria, about 120 miles north of Cairo by road. Foreign diplomats and a few Egyptians had warned that if it were discovered that we were American newsmen travelling outside Cairo without government permission, we might be jailed – or worse. So with the invaluable help of two members of the ABC News team who are Italian citizens – we passed through roadblock after roadblock – staring down the barrels of rifles and machine guns – posing as a team of Italian journalists, waving our official press armbands and speaking as much Italian as we

Two air raids delayed our arrival in the center of Alexandria. The second was a nightmare. In the profound darkness of a blackout on a moonless night on a narrow street in Alexandria, our car was stopped. At first I thought it might be safer to get out of the car during the bombing and take shelter on the ground floor of one of the buildings, but countless dark faces surged around our parked car shouting at us in Arabic as the air raid sirens howled. Our Egyptian driver jumped out and ran for shelter. A fellow newsman was sitting next to me in the car. As he and I weighed our chances, anti-aircraft shells popped like fireworks along the narrow slit of sky – and the booming crash of bombs rocked the car. Sweat poured down our faces. In the eerie flashes of light from the explosions my friend told me, "Harry don't get out whatever you do. I was in Baghdad in 1958 and I saw the Arabs literally tear apart two foreign newsmen. Better a bomb than that." So we decided to remain in the car rather than take the chance that our identities would be discovered.

When the worst of the air raid was over the cars were allowed to move again – but slowly and without lights. I learned later that it was Alexandria's second night in a row of air raids.

Creeping through unrecognizable black streets of Alexandria, our car was stopped time and again by groups of Civil Defense militiamen. It was not easy to convince them of our story even though our Italian friends showed their passports from time to time. At one point my car was surrounded by about 50 of the militiamen – who doubted the word of our loyal Egyptian driver that we were foreign journalists on an authorized trip . . . and not Americans. The militiamen began beating on the hood and roof of the car – trying to yank open the locked doors – banging on the closed windows. ABC News 2001/11/01 : CIA-RDP69B00369R000200290033-7  
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of my favorite heroes – got out of the car and told the undisciplined militiamen to take him to a nearby police station. There he risked his own safety by persuading officials that we were not American journalists.

Six and one half hours after we had set out from Cairo, we reached a religious institution in Alexandria where the priests sheltered us for the night and where we learned that that very day, angry mobs of Egyptians had sacked American and British consulates in Alexandria as well as in Port Said. With the help of several foreign diplomats – a few sizeable tips and some fast talking – we managed to board the Esperia, the first passenger ship to leave Egypt since the war began. It is a Mediterranean cruise ship with a capacity of less than 500 but was jammed with 680 persons forced to leave Egypt because of the war, including 34 Americans and 43 Italian Jews. The Jews were rescued from prison in Alexandria by the Italian consul.

The war was not behind us even after we boarded. As our ship pulled away from the dock, Egyptian soldiers were firing into the water at suspected Israeli frogmen. During the three nights of the sea voyage to Italy, my bed was a deck chair, the same kind of accommodation many other passengers had, and I was glad to get it. We had reported from inside Egypt as long as we were allowed to, and we managed to get out to tell the rest.

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Mr. Debelius news reports are heard frequently on the ABC Radio Network and on ABC-TV's "Peter Jennings with the News."